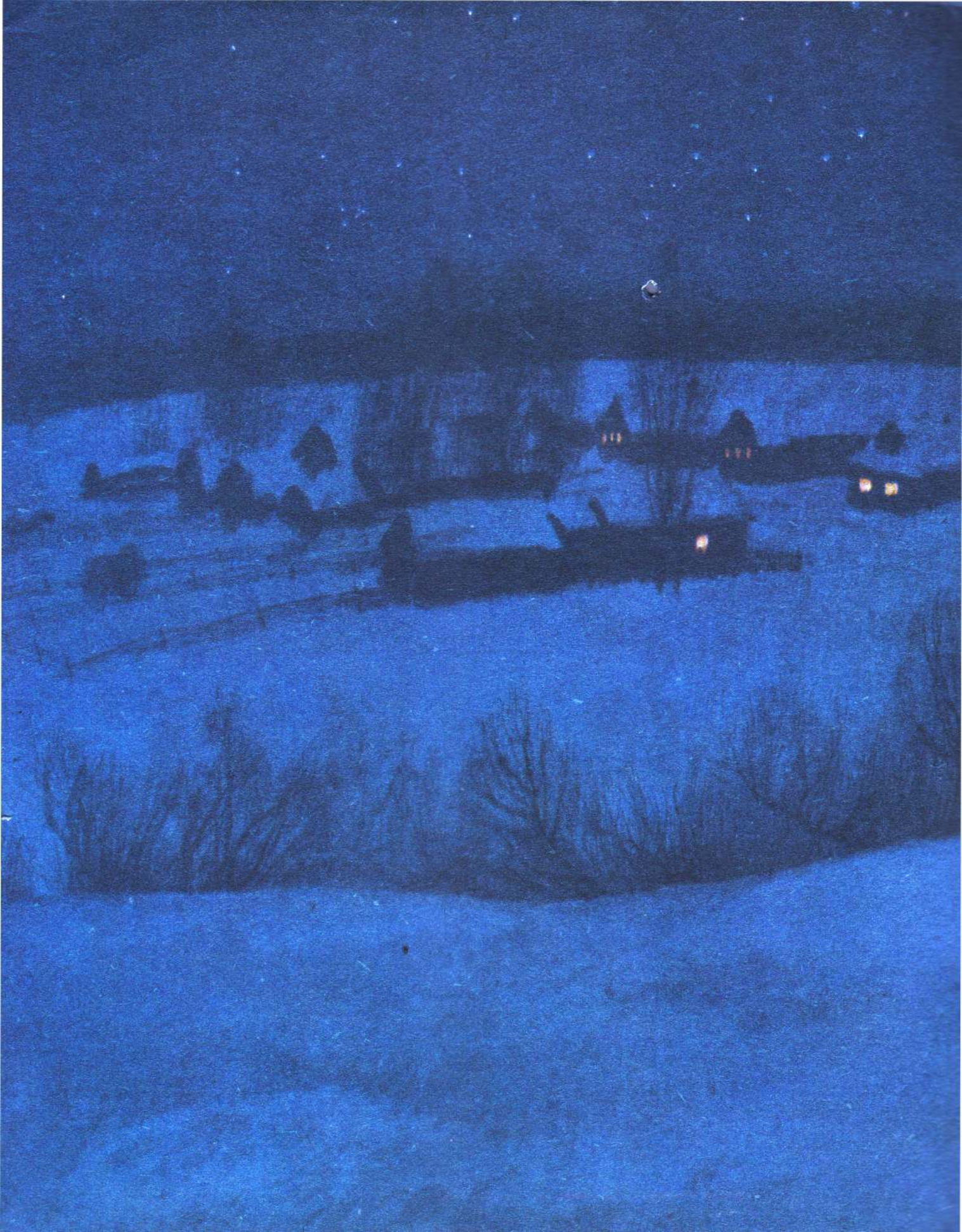




YURI KOVAL

**A PURPLE
BIRD**



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A PURPLE BIRD

Translated by Fainna Solasko
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THE FOREST ROAD

The sun had been blazing for many weeks, drying the forest road to a dusty white. In the ruts, which had once been filled by deep puddles, the ground had burst and was covered with a close network of cracks. Tiny, dry-skinned frogs hopped about in the ruts.

From afar I saw a white kerchief bobbing amidst the fireweed and raspberry canes in a ditch by the road. A little old woman was searching for something in the grass.

"You haven't lost a needle by chance?" I said with a smile as I approached.

"It's my axe, dearie. I hid it yesterday, and now I can't recall under which bush it was."

I poked about in the raspberry patch. Dust trickled down from the brown canes and the limp leaves. The axe blade flashed in the shadows under the bushes like some deep-water fish.

"There it is!" the old woman cried. "I was beginning to think the wood goblin'd got it."

"What goblin?"

"The one that lives in the wood. He's a fright, what with his bull's cloudy eyes."

"Indeed?"

"He's got a blue beard, and it's all spotted."

"You mean you've actually seen a wood goblin?"

"My, yes, dearie. He comes to the store for sugar."

"Where does he get the money?"

"He makes it himself," she replied and turned off the road. Her white kerchief was instantly lost in the tall grass, though it reappeared for a moment when she reached the fir trees.

"Well," I said to myself as I continued on my way, "a wood goblin with a bull's cloudy eyes, indeed!"

It was dark beneath the fir trees despite the bright sun. The goblin was probably lurking somewhere in the gloom there, far away from the road.

The wood ended suddenly, and I came out upon a large field which resembled a round lake. In its very center, like an island, was a village. The high dome of the heavens rested upon the tops of the trees that surrounded the field, and oily, light-blue waves rippled across it. The flax was in bloom.

I gazed at the village. I did not know its name and certainly did not dream that I would one day live here, that I would see the little old woman in the white kerchief again and perhaps the wood goblin as well.



CLEAR GRUB

The forest road crossed the field, becoming a road in the fields. Reaching the village, it became a village street.

The street was lined with fine, stout houses roofed with aspen shingles. On some time and the wind had made the shingles a silvery-gray, while on others the shingles were new and glinted gold in the sun.

As I walked towards the well, the people in the houses watched me out of their windows. I could see they were wondering who I was.

I tripped and thought the faces in the windows would laugh, but they all remained grave. I had a drink and sat down to rest on a log by the well.

In the house opposite a window opened. A woman looked at me, turned back into the room and said, "He had a drink and now he's just sitting there." And she shut the window again.

Two ganders approached. They were about to cackle, but hesitated: who was that stranger?

Then, coming down the road, I spotted the little old woman, the very same one who had been searching for her axe in the woods. She was now dragging a long birch pole.

"Let me give you a hand."

"Was that you who found my axe?"

"Yes."

"I was beginning to think the wood goblin'd got it."

I relieved her of the pole and dragged it along in the little old woman's wake.

In a house of five windows one window opened and a shaggy head appeared from behind a potted lemon plant. "Whose boy is he, Pantilevna?" the head asked.

"Mine. He found my axe."

We continued on a bit farther. Everyone we met expressed surprise. Who was Pantilevna's companion?

A woman shouted from where she stood in her garden: "Is that your nephew from Olyushino?"

"Yes!" Pantilevna shouted back. "He found my axe for me."

I was quite amazed to have suddenly become her nephew, but did not show my surprise and hurried along after her in silence.

We encountered another woman. She was carrying a little girl in her arms. "Who's that pulling the birch pole?" she asked.

"My nephew," Pantilevna replied. "He found my axe. I was beginning to think the wood goblin'd got it."

Thus, as we proceeded down the village street, Pantilevna told everyone we met that I was her nephew and that I had found her axe.

"And now he's carrying my birch pole for me."

"Can't he talk?" someone asked.

"Sure, I can," I said. "I'm her nephew. She lost her axe and was beginning to think the wood goblin'd got it, but it was in the raspberry patch. And I'm her nephew."

"We turn in here, nephew dearie. This is our house."

When soldiers line up the tallest is always in front, while the shortest brings up the rear. So, too, Pantilevna's house, the last in the row, was the smallest, with only three little windows. One says of such houses that they are made of a dumpling with a pancake for a roof.

I dropped the pole and sat down on the little bench outside her house.

"What's your village called?" I asked.

"Clear Grub."

"Clear what?"

"Grub."

Grub. What a strange name. "What's 'Clear Grub' supposed to mean?"

"That's our village, dearie."

"I know. But what does 'grub' mean?"

"Why, grub is all of here, grub is. Everything all around the village, it's all grub."

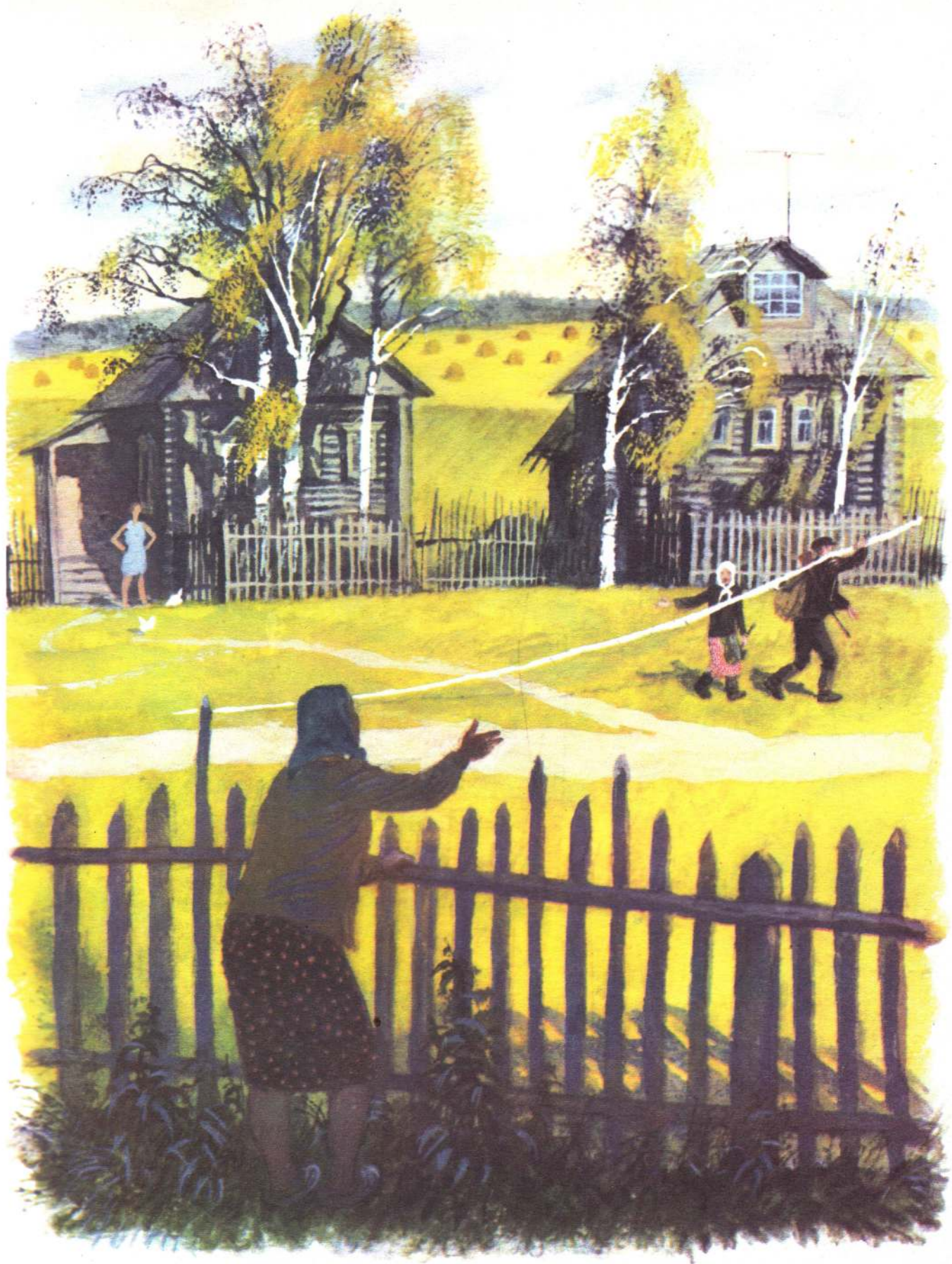
I looked off and saw the field that surrounded the village and beyond it the wood. "That's no grub. It's a field."

"Oh, yes, it is. And see how clear it is. It's all grub. Off yonder, where the little fir trees are, that's all scrub."

And that is how I learned that hereabouts a grub was a field, but not just any field: it was a field set in the heart of a wood, a field that had once been woodland, too. But then the trees had been cut down and the tree stumps had been grubbed out. The people had grubbed and grubbed, and what they had when they were done was a grub.

"All right, a grub it is then," I said. "I guess I'll be going."

"Don't go, nephew dearie. I'll put on the samovar."

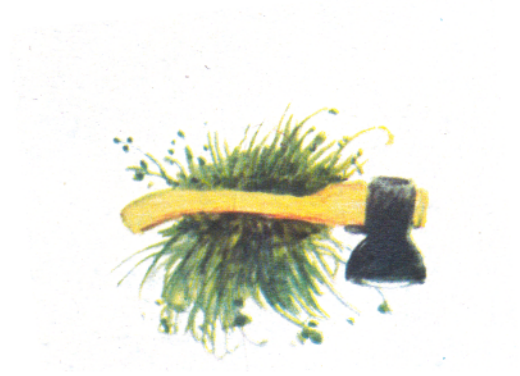


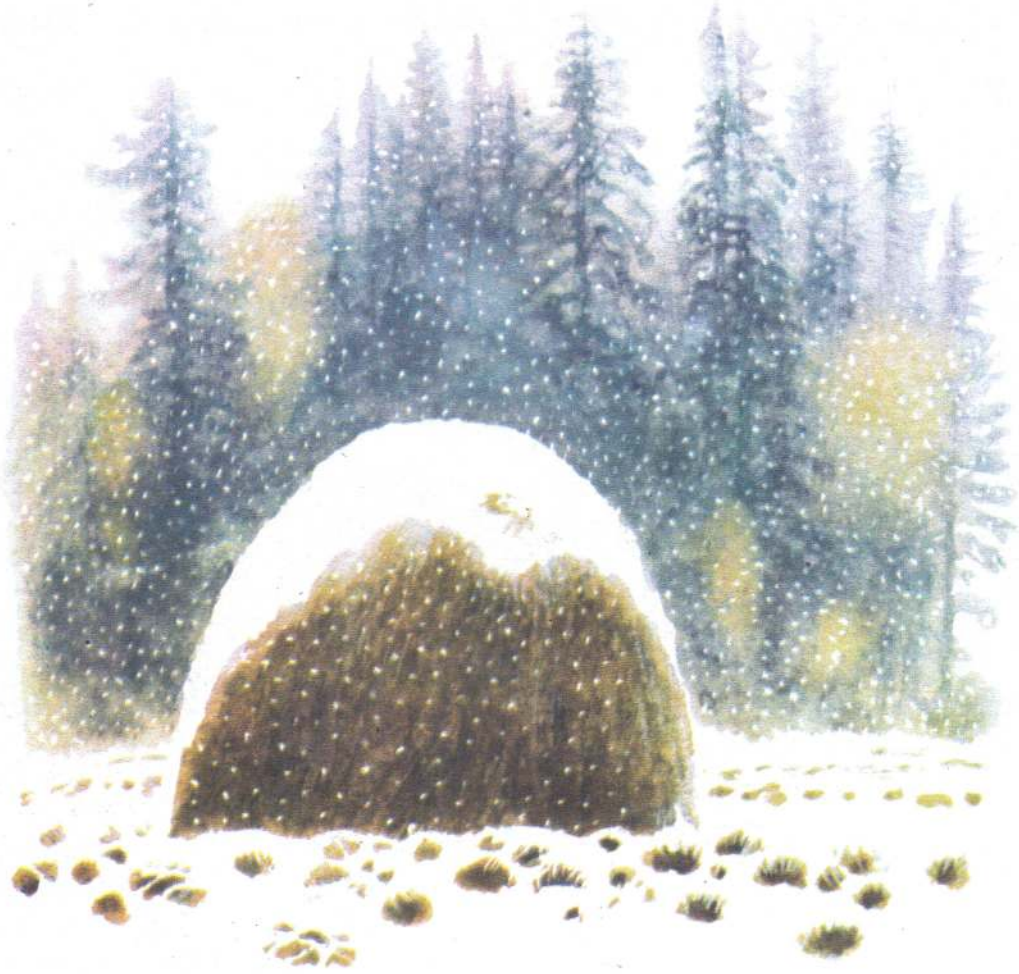
So I waited for the samovar to boil. By then it was dusk, and so I stayed the night.

“Where are you going?” Pantilevna said the next morning. “Stay on. There’s room enough.”

I thought it over, sent off a telegram and remained in Pantilevna’s house. I don’t know how it came about, but I lived on in her house for a day, and a month, and a whole year. I lived in her house and worked on my book. Not this book, another one.

I’m writing this book in Moscow, looking out of my window at the gloomy firehouse opposite and thinking of Clear Grub Village.





THE HAYSTACK

At a bend in the Yalma River Uncle Zui happened to be living in an old bathhouse.

He did not live there alone, but with his granddaughter Nyura, and he had all one should have: both chickens and a cow.

"I don't have a pig, though," Uncle Zui said. "And anyway, what does a good man want with a pig?"

Uncle Zui had mown some grass in the woods that summer and had made a small haystack.



But his was not the usual kind.

His was a clever one.

He had not set it on the ground as everyone usually does, but on a sled, so that in winter he would have no trouble getting it out of the woods.

By the time winter set in, however, Uncle Zui had forgotten all about his hay.

"Why don't you bring the hay in from the woods, Grandpa?" Nyura said. "Have you forgotten all about it?"

"What hay?" Uncle Zui asked and then slapped his forehead and ran off to the chairman of the collective farm to get a horse.

He was given a good horse and soon reached the familiar spot in the woods.

The haystack was blanketed with snow.

Uncle Zui began kicking the snow away from the sled.

When he looked around the horse was gone: the darn creature had wandered off.

He ran after it, but the horse balked and would not approach the haystack.

"What's the matter? Why's he so stubborn?" Uncle Zui wondered.

He finally managed to hitch it up to the sled.

"Giddyap!" Uncle Zui shouted and clucked his tongue, but the horse would not budge, for the runners had frozen hard to the ground. He had to tap them with his axe head until finally the sled began to move, and the haystack on it, too. It sailed along just as it had stood in the woods.

Uncle Zui walked beside it, clucking his tongue at the horse. By the time they reached home it was dinnertime.

Uncle Zui began unhitching the horse.

"What've you got there, Zui?" Pantilevna shouted.

"Hay, Pantilevna. What d'you think?"

"But what's that there on the sled?"

Uncle Zui looked up and sat right down in the snow from amazement. A fierce shaggy muzzle was sticking out of the hay. A bear!

"Grr-rr!" The bear shifted its weight, tilted the haystack and tumbled out.

It shook its head, snatched up a mouthful of snow and streaked off towards the woods.

"Wait!" Uncle Zui shouted. "After him, Pantilevna!"

With a roar the bear disappeared in a thicket of small fir trees.

A crowd soon gathered. Some hunters came up and, naturally, I was there, too. We stood around, looking at the bear tracks.

"That was some den it made in Zui's haystack," one of the hunters said.

"It might've bitten you, Zui!" Pantilevna cried.

"Eh," Uncle Zui said, "now the hay'll stink of bear. I bet the cow won't come near it."



A PURPLE BIRD

One day in May, when the snow had melted, I was sitting on a chair I had brought out of the house, cleaning my gun. Uncle Zui sat beside me on a stump, rolling a cigarette.

"That's how it is," he said. "My hens are no layers."

"Don't they lay eggs?"

"You call an egg a week a good layer?"

I peered at the sky through the barrels of my shotgun. Bright orange rings flared up in them and linked, while at the far end they blended into a light-blue disk, a bit of the sky.

"I bought myself a new hen," Uncle Zui went on. "Got it from Vitya Belov. All his hens are good layers."

When I was through cleaning my gun I went to have a look at the new hen.

There were three hens scratching around in Zui's yard.

Two were the familiar speckled ones, but the third was of an unusual purple tint, though it seemed quite normal, clucking away and pecking at some crumbled cooked potatoes.

"What sort of breed is it?"

"It's a white hen," Uncle Zui said. "But being as there's white hens in every yard, I dabbed some ink on it, so's I could tell which one was mine."

"What if it starts laying purple eggs?"

Just then the hen came up to me and pecked at my boot.

"Shoo!" I said and swung my foot.

The hen squawked, but soon ran up to me again and pecked at my boot again.

"Here, chickie-chickie," Uncle Zui called. "What d'you think you are doing, you fool?"

I suddenly realised what it was all about.

My boots were covered with mud. That morning I had gone to the stable, where someone had spilled some oats.

Then I had whitewashed the apple trees and had spattered lime on my boots.

Now each boot was a clay pie filled with oats and lime.

The purple hen took such a liking to my boots that it hurried after me when I turned to go home.

I took off my boots on the porch and left them outside for the hen's pleasure.

From the window I watched it pecking away at the oats and lime.

It needed the lime to make its eggshells harder.

When it was done with my boots the hen turned over a tin can of worms I had dug for bait and began devouring them.

This was too much.

I dashed out and threw a stick at it.

The hen flapped its inky wings, streaked across the yard and came to roost on a birch tree.

Returning from a hunt the next day, I saw the purple bird on the road.

It recognized me from afar and came running to peck at my boots.

For as long as there was mud on the road the hen would greet me every day, but then spring turned to summer and the mud dried up.

One day I was coming home and saw my hen on the road.
It didn't even look my way, but went off in another direction. "What's the matter?" I wondered.

I looked down at my boots and saw that I had no boots on.
I was walking barefoot through the grass, for it was summer.





UNDER THE PINES

April drifted into May. The last of the snow melted in the woods, and the sun was becoming ever warmer. It made me terribly drowsy after a night spent watching the games of the black wood grouse.

I was crossing a swamp, and every now and then I would fall to my knees on a mossy hummock to pick some of last year's cranberries that had wintered under the snow and were now purple and sweet.

A small rise beyond the swamp was dotted with pines. I took off my jacket, spread it out and lay down under the trees.

The rise seemed as thickly covered with ladybugs as the hummocks in the swamp had been with cranberries. This amused me, but I soon realized that

cranberries were to be preferred to ladybugs, if for no other reason than they did not move. The ladybugs crawled over my face, got into my hair and under my collar. At first, I flicked them off, then succumbed and, rolling over onto my back, gazed upward.

The pines stretched away into the sky. It seemed that they were growing out of my chest. Here and there ladybugs would take to the air, and then brick-red, vanishing spots would spiral off between the tree trunks. There was a gust of wind high up. A pine dropped a cone. It hit the ground with a dull thud.

I closed my eyes and dozed. I could hear the pines rustling and the distant mumbling of heath cocks. Then I heard the muted sound of a trumpet.

"Is that a moose?" I wondered. "No, the mating season's in the fall."

The trumpeting was barely audible, yet the notes were clear and modulated.

The sound was brassy, not at all a forest sound. No moose could trumpet like that. A moose's call was a groan, it was deep and hoarse. This sound did not seem alive. A second trumpet joined the first, softly and imperceptibly. Its sound was in a lower key. It supported and echoed the first.

"What can it be? It's not a moose, and it's not the cry of a crane."

The sun was very hot. I dozed and then fell asleep.

In my sleep I decided that the sounds were coming from under the ground, from some place inside the hill which resembled a great drum. It boomed and hummed, while from very far below, deep in the ground, there rose a modulated sound, as though someone were fingering the strings of an instrument.

I dreamed that the pines were trumpets that had sprouted branches and were now trumpeting as they swayed above me.

When I awoke the sun was setting.

I could hear neither the trumpets nor the strings, nothing but the song of a chaffinch perched on a low branch.

I pressed my ear to the trunk and heard a distant booming, as in a sea-shell.

I descended and started out for home, still wondering what the sounds I had heard issuing from the ground could have been.

Perhaps a brook ran under the rise, overflowing with gurgling, bubbling spring water.

It was evening when I reached home, and I headed straight for the bathhouse, forgetting all about the sounds in the ground.

I would never have recalled them had I not later heard the following story.

During the past war a battle had raged near Clear Grub Village.

The time was 1942.

Our soldiers were retreating through the woods and swamps.

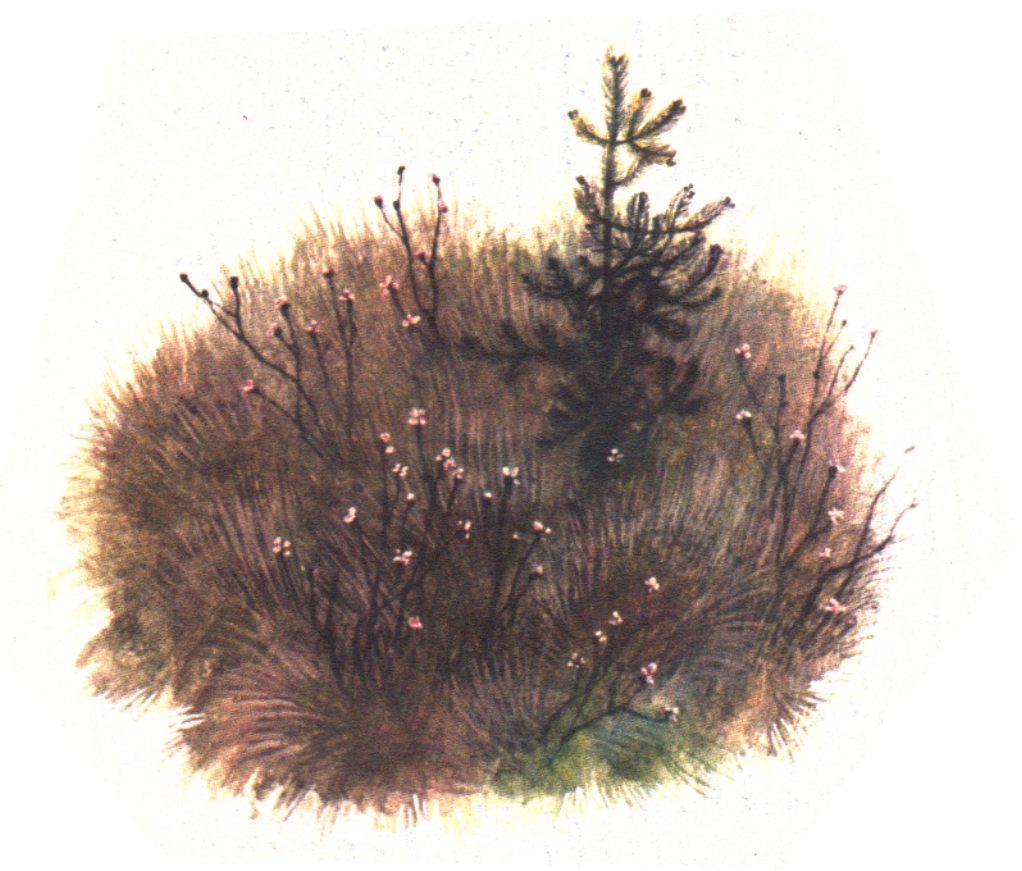
The nazis kept up a barrage of mortar fire. An army band was part of the retreating force.



Shortly before the battle began the musicians buried their instruments on some rise in the woods so that their trumpets, French horns, flutes, drums and cymbals would not fall into enemy hands.

The instruments did not fall into the enemy's hands, but many of the musicians were killed in action, and those who survived were later unable to find the small hill in the forest.

Thinking back now, I must have fallen asleep on that very spot.



THE WOOD GOBLIN

I was sailing down the Yalma, sitting in the stern of the boat, paddling with my single oar. I had sailed quite a distance from Clear Grub, and the stream was taking me ever deeper into the forest. The fallen leaves had made the water black. Blue darning needles flitted back and forth across the stream.

I was in such good spirits that I felt like singing. And what, I said to myself, if a pretty girl were picking raspberries nearby? She would hear me singing and would come out onto the bank. Daydreaming thus, I began quite boisterously:

*When I was a lad of seventeen,
I went off to town to dance...*

I completed the first stanza and was about to launch into the second when I suddenly heard someone say:

"What're you bellowing about?"

That was a nice how d'you-do! Whoever it was was no pretty maid. The voice sounded coarse and swampy. I looked around.

I saw no one. Nothing but the bushes.



“What’re you craning your neck for? Don’t you see me?”

“No, I can’t say that I do.”

“Well, if you don’t, then you don’t.”

“Hey, move a branch so’s I will!”

He was silent. What a foolish situation. I lay down my oar, intending to have a smoke, but could not find my tobacco. It had just been there in my pocket. Now it was gone.

It suddenly grew dark over the stream. The sun had hidden behind a cloud. Where was I? The woods all around were menacing, clawing and black, the water in the stream was black, and the darning needles flitting above it were black, too. Who could think of pretty maids? Who could think of raspberries? Why, even a human voice sounded weird here.

I swung my oar fiercely and headed back home to Clear Grub Village and Pantilevna.

“Well, dearie,” she said. “You’re lucky to be alive. He might’ve drawn you down into the swamp.”

“Who?”

“The wood goblin! You know how he lured Mironikha on? ‘Come here, girlie,’ he said. ‘I’ll give you a candy.’ And Mironikha, that old fool, fell for it. Well, he grabbed hold of her arm and pulled her towards the swamp. Mironikha nearly gave up the ghost. So you see what might’ve happened.” I didn’t argue with Pantilevna, for I knew Mironikha. Whenever she dropped by of an evening she was sure to produce some fantastic tale. Thus: she was leaving for Moscow soon, as her nephew, who was now a general and a very handsome fellow, lived there. He was going to buy her a TV set. And similar nonsense. Yet, who had been talking to me on the bank? For sure, it had not been a wood goblin.

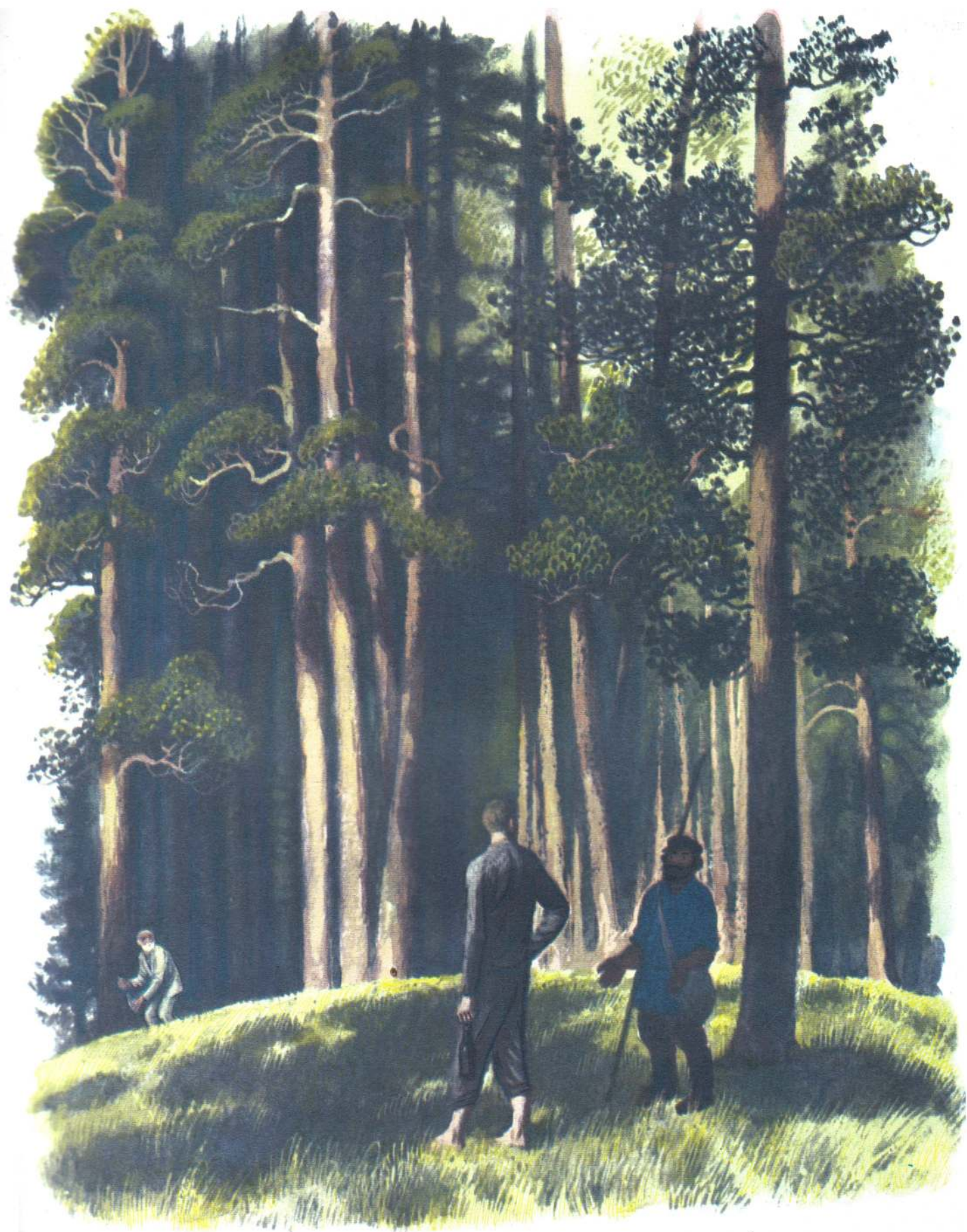
A month passed. I forgot all about the goblin. Then, in August, when the orange milk mushrooms, the delicious milky caps, came into season, I had reason to recall him.

Uncle Zui and I went to the woods for mushrooms. We were barefoot. All the inhabitants of Clear Grub went hunting for milky caps barefoot, using their feet to search for them. Indeed! And the reason they did so was that this was the way to find the tiniest mushrooms down in the grass. If you felt around with your hands you’d bruise your knees and wear out your trousers.

The object was to find a mushroom small enough to slip through the neck of a beer bottle.

Other mushrooms were pickled in barrels, but delicious milky caps were only pickled in bottles here.

You’d put up about twenty bottles for the winter, and then all you’d do was shake them out as you needed them.



In the beginning, I would set out in my boots and take them off in the woods, but I soon gave it up, for then I'd be stuck carrying my boots around. After a while I only took off one boot, as I worked with one foot, but in the end I left off doing this, too, having become the butt of every joke.

Uncle Zui and I reached the pine grove. There were a lot of milky caps there. While Uncle Zui swished his foot back and forth like a shuttle I went about the job cautiously, barely brushing the grass with my foot for fear of stumbling upon a snake. Something rustled in the bushes behind me. I turned around and froze.

A long stick was slowly emerging from a bush. There was a sharp curved knife attached to the end of it. This knife was now moving closer and closer to me. Closer and closer. My heart stopped beating. I stood there petrified, while my foot went on searching for milky caps of its own accord.

The bushes parted, and a tiny little man appeared, a dwarf, actually. The wood goblin! He was holding the stick with the knife attached to it. The man was scrawny-looking. His beard was a bluish-gray and his hands were as black as coal. He stared at me. The knife-edged stick moved in his hand as he spoke in a hollow voice that seemed to be issuing from a hollow tree:

"Looking for milky caps?"

"Yes," I replied, and my voice sounded hollow, too. "We wanted to get some milky caps."

"We wanted to get some milky caps," Uncle Zui chimed in over my shoulder. "For a bottle."

"What bottle?"

"A half-liter bottle. So's they'd come out easy."

"Ah," said the wood goblin and nodded. "There's a lot of milky caps this year. Weren't nearly as many last year. Got any tobacco?"

"Yes," said Uncle Zui, "I've got some."

The wood goblin sat down on a tree stump and began rolling a cigarette. Now, at last, I could have a close look at him. Indeed, he was exactly as Pantilevna had described him, except that I did not see any fangs.

Uncle Zui stepped up to the goblin and said, "What might you be doing here?"

"I collect gallipot. Pine sap, you know. I'm seeped in it like a cross-bill. I can't never wash my hands clean. I've even got sap in my beard."

It was clear to me now. I had often come upon pine trees with notched trunks in the woods. The notches were like small "V's", one above the other. The sap would run from a higher notch to a lower one and then drip into a can. Gallipot is known as "tree cure", because it will heal any wound on a tree trunk.

I was disappointed to discover that the wood goblin was a sap collector.

"What's this fierce-looking stick for?" I asked.

"It's to notch the trunks and make the sap run."

“Won’t a pine die after you’re through with it?” Uncle Zui asked.

“Nope,” the little man replied. “Haven’t been dying so far.”

We gave him some more tobacco and then walked on. When we were some way off I recalled that I should have asked him whether he had spoken to me from the bushes that day I had paddled into the woods.

In the evening I told Pantilevna about our encounter with the wood goblin.

“Eh, dearie,” Pantilevna said, “you think that was the wood goblin? The real goblin’s in the woods, staring out of his cloudy eyes and making his own money.”





A PIECE OF IRON

On a cloudless night the moon sailed over Clear Grub Village, was reflected in the puddles and touched the shingled roofs with silver. All was still in the village.

With the approach of dawn hollow blows could be heard coming from the bank of the Yalma, as though someone were striking a moss-covered bell. The smithy, an ancient, sooty wooden barn faced with rusted sheets of tin at the corners, showed dark on the bank beyond the willows. The sounds were coming from there.

I usually went fishing before dawn. The barn loomed dark and eerie in the fog-shrouded alder grove. The door opened suddenly and I saw the fire. It was



not the bright flame of a campfire, but a muted one. The berries of the snowball tree become that color after a frost. The fiery door was like the entrance to a cave which perhaps led down to the bowels of the earth.

A little man shot out of the door and raced towards the bank. He was carrying a pair of long-handled pincers that held a red-hot dragon bone. He plunged the bone into the water. A hissing sound much louder than that of a cat or a snake followed as a cloud of steam rose up over the water.

"Hello, Voloshin," I said.

At noon I passed by again on my way home. A small crowd had gathered outside the smithy: some had come for nails, others to have their horses shod. Inside, the forge blazed. Shurka Kletkin, the blacksmith's striker, was working the bellows, breathing air onto the coals in the forge. An iron pig lay in the very center of the furnace. It had become so red one could not tell it from the fire.

Voloshin snatched the pig out with his long-handled pincers and set it on the anvil. Shurka brought the sledgehammer down upon it, flattening it. Voloshin kept turning it under the blows. Shurka Kletkin was a strong fellow with the shoulders of a bull. He was the strongman. Voloshin was the craftsman.

"Did you catch enough for chowder?" Voloshin asked.

I dumped the ides out of my creel.

"It'll do," Shurka Kletkin said hoarsely as he examined the fish. "See them glitter? Just like pieces of iron."

In Shurka's world everything was a piece of iron. He called a tractor a piece of iron, a gun a piece of iron and a pot a piece of iron, too. Shurka was a young man, but his voice was as hoarse as a rusty old man's.

We cleaned the fish on the bank. Scales scattered under our knives like splashes, glittering in the grass. At last, Voloshin picked up the pot with his pincers and set it in the center of the forge, right on the red-hot coals.

Uncle Zui arrived just in time for chowder. He came up rolling along a rusty old wheel. Where on earth had he found it? Voloshin was an old friend, and so Uncle Zui was forever hauling in all sorts of scrap iron for him. Shurka walked over and butted the wheel with the tip of his boot.

"It's a hunk of junk," he said. "It's rotted through."

"Rotted through?" Uncle Zui sounded offended. "Look at these here nuts. Why, there's enough nuts here for a locomotive."

Voloshin was silent, examining the wheel to see if it might be put to any use.

How strange: no one had wanted this rusty piece of iron, but here it was now in the smithy, and with each passing minute it was gaining in value, for it had now become raw material for a craftsman. Who could tell what Voloshin would fashion from it? One thing was sure: he would make it into something, perhaps even something that would cause Shurka to say:

"That's not a bad piece of iron."

“And you said it’s rotten through!” Uncle Zui sputtered. “You’re a piece of iron yourself, Shurka! See how crooked your nose is.”

Shurka was hurt. He fingered his nose to see whether it was indeed crooked.

The chowder boiled and bubbled. Flecks of foam splashed out of the pot and onto the coals as the steam rose and mingled with the sour smell of forged iron. Voloshin produced some spoons from a little cabinet: wooden ones for us and a piece of iron one for Shurka.

We ate the chowder in deep silence, contemplating whether or not it was just right. It was.





CHERRY

A horse was tied to the fence in Nikolai the veterinary's yard, and its saddle was thrown over the fence nearby. Nikolai and Frolov, one of the farm men, stood beside the horse.

"What's the matter?" I asked.

"Have a look," Nikolai said.

There was a gash on the horse's side that was bleeding badly. The blood was running down into the nettles.

"Someone strung barbed wire between the posts," Frolov said to me, "and I was in a hurry to get to the farm. I didn't notice it. And see what happened."

"You should notice things," Nikolai said as he blotted the blood with a piece of cotton and put iodine on the wound.

"But I was in a hurry. I didn't see the wire!"

"You should've seen it."

I began going through my pockets, recalling that there should be a lump of sugar in one of them. True enough, there was, though it was covered with specks of tobacco.

Nikolai got out a surgical needle and silk and began putting on stitches.

"I can't look," Frolov said and walked away. "I can feel every stitch."

"He can race his horse, but he can't notice barbed wire," Nikolai said.

The horse didn't seem to feel the pain. It stood there patiently, but did not take the sugar from my hand.

"Good girl. Just a little more," Nikolai said.

The horse dropped its head towards the nettles. It kept closing its eyes and shivering.

"He can race his horse, but he can't keep it out of harm's way," Nikolai said.

Frolov stood off to a side, smoking, his back to us.

"That's all," Nikolai said.

The horse understood. It turned its head to look at its side. I offered it the sugar again. It took it and sniffed at my shoulder.

Frolov hoisted the saddle, untied the horse and led it off to the stable. It followed him docilely, swaying as it walked. It was a very strong and even somewhat rounded horse named Cherry.





THE FIREBALL

I went fishing one day, and Uncle Zui tagged along.

"I'll have some chowder with you while I'm at it," he said.

I cast my line by a willow that branched over a still spot. Uncle Zui sat down behind me to watch. The sun sailed slowly over the woods as the day drew to a close.

After a while a fluffy, spreading cloud sailed out from behind the hill. The sun ducked into it, as into the black hollow of a tree, and the sky became dark.

"A storm's blowing up," said Uncle Zui. "It's about time we headed home."

Just then I had a bite. I tugged at my line. It twanged, and as it pulled taut a coppery ide flashed in the deep. Resisting, it surfaced, splashed and fought. I reeled in and tossed the fish onto the grass. A flash of lightning streaked across the sky. There was a clap of thunder overhead. The ide flipped over.

Rain suddenly hit the water with every drop at once and with such force it seemed a hundred ides had slapped the surface with their tails. The river

foamed and came alive. Lightning arched overhead. In the glare of its flashes the hooked ide flipped about in the grass.

"This is a nice how d'you do," Uncle Zui muttered from under the raincoat he held over his head. "It's enough to scare the living daylight out of you."

The rain ended abruptly. Something was shining in the willow branches, something that rolled off them with a crackling sound. Then a gleaming fireball floated by. It rolled towards the river and bobbed unexpectedly.

"Look! What's that?" Uncle Zui shouted.

The fireball, suspended in the air, vibrated slightly. The blinding light hurt our eyes. A halo-like, fiery rainbow framed the flaming ball. Everything was illuminated: the river, the dense growth of milkwort along the banks and the blades of cattail that cut through the water like gleaming knives. Spinning and swaying thus, the fireball whizzed along the bank, barely clearing the tops of the milkwort, then rising up and remaining suspended, as a white apple that had ripened in the sky.

All of a sudden the light went out. The fireball was now expanding into a giant black ball. Purple streaks flashed within it. There was a terrible explosion.

We raced towards home. Uncle Zui could hardly keep up with me.

"What was it?" he shouted. "D'you think it was an atom bomb?"

"It was a fireball. It's called globe lightning."

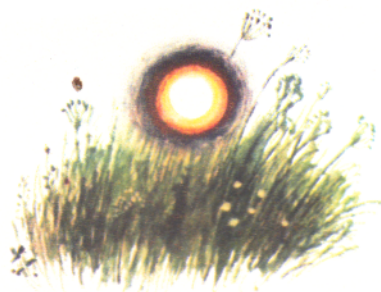
"A fireball? Where'd it come from?"

"I don't know!" I shouted over my shoulder. "Sometimes globe lightning appears during a storm!"

"Ah!" Uncle Zui shouted at my back. "It's probably a stretch of plain lightning rolled up into a ball! What d'you know!"

As soon as we reached home we tore off our wet shirts and put the samovar on for tea.

"What d'you know!" Uncle Zui kept saying. "A stretch of plain old lightning rolled up into a ball. If you think I'll ever go fishing with you again, you've got another thought coming."



NYURA



Uncle Zui's granddaughter Nyura was six years old. She was six for quite a long time. For a whole year, in fact. And then in August Nyura turned seven.

Uncle Zui baked some millet-porridge buns for her birthday and invited company. I was also invited. I tried to think of something to give her as I prepared to go to the party.

"Buy about two kilos of hard candy," Pantilevna said.

"No. I want to give her something more useful."

I went through my belongings and shook my knapsack. There was something heavy in it. My binoculars! A rather good pair. The lenses were good, and it had smooth center focusing. I polished the lenses with a piece of cloth, went out to the porch and trained the glasses on Uncle Zui's yard. Everything was in clear focus: Nyura was busy in the garden, picking dill, and Uncle Zui was lighting the samovar.

"Did you dig the horseradish yet, Nyura?" he shouted.

That didn't come through the binoculars. I could hear him as is.

"Yes," Nyura replied.

I hung the binoculars around my neck by the strap, stopped off at the village store, bought two kilos of hard candy and went to Nyura's party.

There was quite a motley crowd. Fyodor Mironov arrived wearing his kid boots with his mother, Mironikha, in tow. He gave Nyura a pencil box made of plaited birch bark. Old Grandpa Mironov had made it.

Manya Kletkina, aged five, was there. She gave Nyura a white school pinafore with "Noora" embroidered in small letters in one of the corners.

Some other children and grown-ups were there, and everyone gave Nyura a gift that would be of use to her when she started in school: a primer, a ruler, two indelible pencils and a fountain pen. Aunt Ksenia gave her a brown school uniform which she made herself. Uncle Zui gave her a yellow leatherette briefcase. The Mokhov twins brought two pails of huckleberries.

"We were out picking them all day. The mosquitoes are fierce."

"That's not a school present," Mironikha said.

"Why not? It sure is," the Mokhov twins replied and began eating the berries.

"Happy birthday. You're seven now. And here's my present: two kilos of candy and these binoculars," I said.

Nyura was delighted. She laughed when she saw the binoculars. I explained how to focus them and which end to look through.

The children scampered off and took turns peering at us through the glasses.

"It's not a school present," Mironikha said, as though she had never seen any binoculars before.

"Why not?" I retorted. "After all, a schoolgirl's going to use them."

"And their teacher Alexei Stepanych might take them all up to the roof to look at the stars," Uncle Zui offered.

At this everyone went into the house and took their seats around the table, falling on the buns and cucumbers. There was a loud crunching of cucumbers, with Mironikha making the most noise. I especially liked the envelope-shaped buns.

Nyura was very excited. She had put the primer, binoculars and other gifts into her briefcase and was now racing around the table with it. Having had their fill of tea and buns, the children ran outside to play ball. We went over to sit by the window and drink our tea unhurriedly as we watched them playing, and the twilight deepening into evening, and the swallows swooping over the barns and the road.

At last, the guests rose to leave.

"Thank you kindly," they said. "Thank you for the cucumbers and buns."



“Thank you,” Nyura replied. “Thank you for the dress, and for the pinafore, and for the binoculars.”

A week passed, and it was September 1st, the first day of school. Early that morning I went out on the porch and saw Nyura. She was coming down the street in her brown school uniform and white school pinafore with “Noora” embroidered in the corner. She was carrying a large bouquet of golden autumn flowers, and the binoculars hung on a strap from her neck. Uncle Zui followed about ten steps behind, shouting:

“Look, Pantilevna! My Nyura’s a schoolgirl now!”

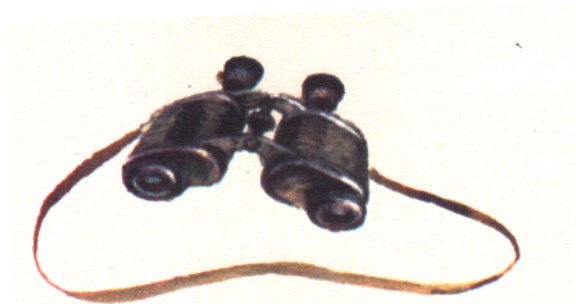
“My, my,” Pantilevna clucked, nodding her head. “Good for her!”

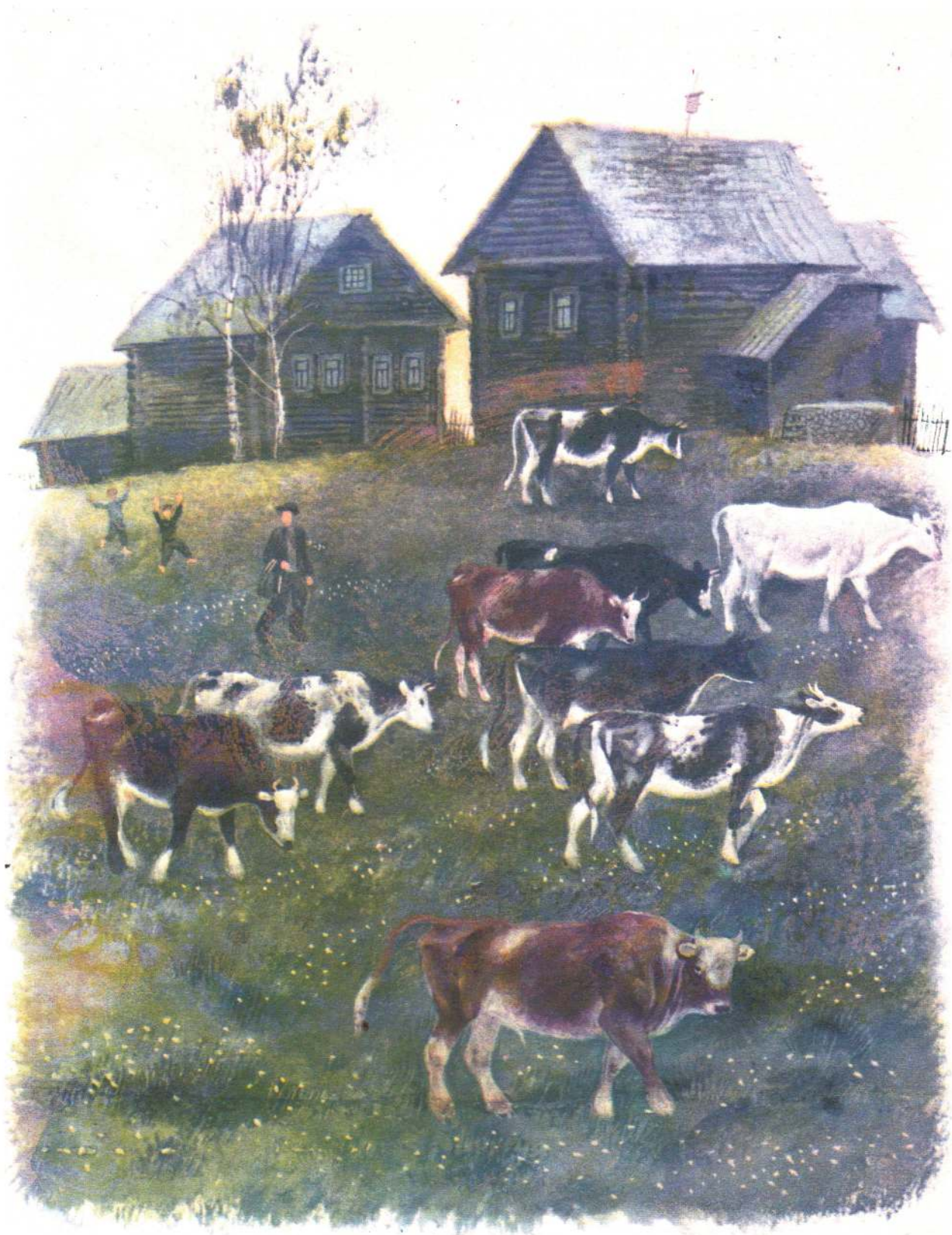
And everyone looked out of their windows and then came outside to look at Nyura, because this September 1st she was the only child in Clear Grub Village to be starting in school.

Alexei Stepanych, the village teacher, greeted Nyura outside the schoolhouse. He accepted the bouquet she held up to him and said, “Well, Nyura, you’re a first-grader now. Congratulations. And you were quite right in bringing the binoculars. We’ll all go up to the roof later and have a look at the stars.”

Uncle Zui, Pantilevna, Ksenia, Mironikha and quite a few others stood outside the schoolhouse watching Nyura climb the porch steps. Then the door closed behind her.

Thus, Nyura became a first-grader, which was only as it should have been, for she was seven. And she would be seven for a long time. For a whole year.





BUNYA'S HORNS

Vasya Marei was the shepherd of Clear Grub Village. He wore rubber boots, had a pouch slung over his shoulder and carried a long rope whip. He was a real shepherd. When he brought the herd in at sunset the Mokhov twins would run after him, chanting:

*Vasya Marei,
Keep the gnats away!*

“How can I do that?” Vasya would say. “They like the taste of humans.”



The village women held Vasya in great esteem.

"Eat your fill, Vasya dearie, so's you won't be weary," Pantilevna would say when it was her turn to give him dinner.

And Vasya would dive into the cabbage soup.

Vasya ate in each house in turn: at our house one day, at Uncle Zui's the next, at Mironikha's the day after and so on, down the line, every day in another house. Everyone tried to give him a tasty meal, to make sure he'd do his job well.

Pantilevna would say as he ate, "Now, Vasya, you keep an eye on my Beauty."

"Don't you worry, Pantilevna. I keep an eye out for your Beauty as is," he'd reply.

I had often come upon the herd in the woods, but never once had I seen Vasya keeping an eye out for any of the cows. They'd be grazing off by themselves, while he'd be getting some shuteye under the elderberry bushes.

"Vasya! Vasya! The cows have wandered off!"

"Huh? Ah, damn!" Vasya'd jump to his feet. "Where've they gone to?" Then he'd catch sight of me and say, "You sure scared me. Let's have a smoke."

But one day Vasya really did get scared, and all on account of the bull. The Clear Grub bull was as mean as they came. His bulging eyes were as round as apples, and his name was Bunya. He even gobbled the grass in a scarcely way. He'd snatch a mouthful, snatch another and raise his head to see if there might not be someone nearby he could butt.

He had butted quite a few men: Tugolukov, Grandpa Mirosha and Frolov, the team leader, who had got off easy by streaking to his tractor and hiding inside. Bunya had stood there, glaring into the cab, licking the glass with his broad tongue.

The next day Frolov went over to see Nikolai, the veterinary. "I don't care what you say, you've got to saw off Bunya's horns," he said.

Nikolai wasn't at all keen on doing that. "You need a special kind of a saw for that, and I don't have one. You can't do it with a plain ordinary saw."

"You find some kind that'll do the job. This is an assignment. Not from me, it's from the farm board. As for me or Grandpa Mirosha, why, he can go on butting us, but we're expecting a committee soon. What if he butts the committee? We'll hold you responsible."

The imminent demise of the committee frightened Nikolai. "All right, I'll find something," he said.

The following evening he invited Vasya Marei over for meat dumplings. As they were eating, Nikolai said, "We've got to saw off his horns, Vasya."

"What horns?"

"Bunya's."

Vasya finished the last dumpling and said, "No."



"He'll butt the committee, Vasya."

"So what?"

Since Vasya could not be coaxed into it, Nikolai sidled up to Tugolukov, the carpenter.

"All right, I'm with you. I'm a man that's been butted by Bunya," he said.

They set to it in the evening, luring Bunya into a pen with a stout fence all around it. The moment he was inside, Bunya sensed there was trouble afoot. He bellowed so that every dog in the village responded. Bunya's tail shot up as he raced around the enclosure. Then he saw Nikolai and Tugolukov all set to saw off his horns. He rushed at the fence, striking it full force with his chest. The fence withstood the blow, but at that moment Tugolukov dropped a noose over

Bunya's horns, drew his head up tight and made it fast to the fence. Then he hobbled him. Though only Bunya's tail was unfettered, he managed to get a whack at Tugolukov's ear all the same.

Nikolai straddled the fence, raised his saw and was about to apply it to Bunya's horns when—crack!—a shot rang out right by his ear. Bang! Bang!

“Get down off that fence! I'll kill every last one of you!” It was Vasya Marei, running towards them, crackling his whip. “I won't let you saw him!”

“Now, Vasya, you know these horns are dangerous.”

“So what? You can keep out of his way.”

Vasya wouldn't let them saw off Bunya's horns, and he was right, for though Bunya was mean, he was a real bull. A Clear Grub bull. Held in respect by all.



THE SHOT

The village schoolhouse was a small, one-room structure, though there were four grades in the one room.

There was only one pupil in the first grade: Uncle Zui's granddaughter Nyura.

There was only one pupil in the second grade: Fyodor Mironov.

There were only two pupils in the third grade: the Mokhov twins.

There was no one in the fourth grade, but the Mokhov twins would be fourth-graders next year.

Well then, how many did that make all together? Four pupils.

Their teacher, Alexei Stepanych, made five people in all.

"That's a lot of people," said Nyura, the schoolgirl.

"Yes, it's quite a lot of people," Alexei Stepanych agreed and smiled. "Tomorrow all these people are going to help the collective farmers pick out the potatoes on the field."

"What about the rabbits?" Fyodor Mironov asked.

"Nyura'll be in charge of the rabbits tomorrow," Alexei Stepanych said.

The school had quite a few rabbits, one hundred and four, to be exact.

"You sure have multiplied," Nyura said the following day after everyone had gone off to the potato field.

The rabbits were housed in wooden crates set out among the apple trees around the schoolhouse.

One might have taken them for beehives, but these were not bees. However, it sounded as if they were buzzing, though rabbits certainly cannot buzz.

It was Vitya, a village boy, buzzing on a stringed stick.

Nyura's duties were not difficult. First, she fed the rabbits potato vines and twigs.

They nibbled away, moving their ears and winking at her as they chewed, as if to say: come on, give us some more greens.

Nyura swept the hutches.

The rabbits were afraid of the whiskbroom and hopped away from it. Then she put the baby rabbits out in a wire-mesh pen on the grass. And that took care of her duties.



She had only to watch over them now and see that all was well. Nyura walked around the yard. All was well. She went into the shed and got out the shotgun.¹ "Just in case," she said to herself. "A hawk might attack us." However, no hawk attacked the rabbits. True, a hawk was circling off in the distance, hunting for chicks.

¹ In the forest villages of Northern Russia children begin hunting at an early age and so learn to use a shotgun when still quite young.

Nyura soon became bored.

She sat on the fence and looked off at the far potato field, making out the people crawling about there like tiny bright bugs.

Now and then a truck would drive up to them. They would load the potatoes on it, and it would drive off again.

Nyura was sitting on the fence when Vitya, the boy who had been buzzing on the stringed stick, came up to her.

"Stop buzzing," she said.

He stopped.

"See this gun?"

He held his curved fingers up to his eyes as though he were peering at her through a pair of field glasses and said, "Yes, m'am, I do."

"Can you shoot a gun?"

Vitya nodded.

"Well, then," Nyura said sternly from where she sat on the fence.

Vitya stood beside her, impatient to start buzzing again. "I'll tell you what," she continued. "Take this gun and go sit on the porch steps. If that hawk attacks, shoot it dead. I'll go get some more potato vines for the rabbits."

Vitya sat down on the porch steps and laid the gun beside him, while Nyura got a pail and a gunny sack from the shed and ran off towards the field.

Sacks of potatoes and piles of potatoes were lined up along the edge of the field.

These were a special, reddish variety.

A huge mound of potato vines had been piled up nearby.

Nyura filled her sack with vines and put some potatoes into her pail.

She looked off to see where the other children were, but they were so far away she could not tell Fyodor Mironov from the Mokhov twins.

She was just wondering whether she might not run over to them when a shot rang out.

Nyura raced back to the schoolhouse, imagining the terrible scene that awaited her: Vitya sprawled on the porch, stone cold dead.

The sack of greens joggled on her back. A potato flew out of the pail and into the dust and spun around.

Nyura dashed into the schoolyard and heard the buzzing.

The shotgun lay on the porch steps.

Vitya sat beside it, buzzing on his stick.

"Who fired that shot?" Nyura yelled, but there was no need to shout, for a small puff of gun smoke still hung over the elderberry bushes. "Just you wait! Wait till the Mokhov twins get back! I'll teach you to fool around with a gun! Stop buzzing!"

Vitya stopped.

"What d'you shoot at?"

"The hawk."

"Don't lie! The hawk's circling over the chicken farm." Nyura looked up at the sky, but did not see the hawk.

"It's over there in the nettles."

The hawk was lying in the nettles. Its spread wings were broken, and the ash-gray feathers were full of birdshot holes. It was so strange.

Nyura stared at the hawk. She could not believe it was Vitya's doing.

It occurred to her that perhaps one of the grown-ups had been here.

But no, they were all working in the field.

The hawk had certainly made a big mistake.

The moment she'd gone, it had made a beeline for the baby rabbits, deciding that Vitya was too young to merit any attention.

And there it was now—clump!—lying in the nettles.

The boys came running in from the field.

They shouted and whooped when they learned that such a small boy as Vitya had shot the hawk.

"He's going to be a cosmonaut!" the Mokhov twins yelled and slapped him on the back.

"Good for you! Good for you!" Fyodor Mironov shouted, stroking his head with all his might.

"I'm sorry for the hawk," Nyura said.

"What? Don't you remember how many rabbits it stole?"

"Still, I'm sorry for it. It was so pretty."

They all began to shout at Nyura.

"Who're you more sorry for, the hawk or the rabbits?" Fyodor Mironov demanded.

"All of them."

"Stupid! You should be more sorry for the baby rabbits. They're so tiny. You tell her, Vitya. Go on, say something."

Vitya was sitting quietly on the porch steps.

They were all surprised to see that he was crying, that tears were streaming down his cheeks, and that he was still a very little boy.

Not more than six years old.

"Quit bawling, Vitya!" the Mokhov twins shouted. "You tell him, Nyura!"

"Let him cry. He killed a bird, so let him cry," she said.

"Where's your conscience, Nyura? You were supposed to be in charge. Why'd you give him the gun? You were supposed to shoot the hawk."

"I wouldn't have shot it. I'd've just scared it, and it would've flown away."



Nyura lit the outdoor brick stove and set the heavy cast-iron pot of potatoes on to boil. While the potatoes were cooking, the boys kept scolding her, and Vitya wept.

"It's like this, Nyura," Fyodor Mironov concluded. "Vitya wasn't annoying the hawk. The hawk attacked, and Vitya defended himself. A fellow like him won't go shooting a gun off into the air!"

The words were just.

Nyura did not reply. She pouted and turned the boiled potatoes right out onto the grass.



SNOWDROPS

After reading the title of this story one might think it was spring, that the snow had melted and snowdrops had appeared in the sunny spots. But it was not spring. It was late autumn. I could see the first snow through the window. It had covered the ground, and only the tall nettles and rusty-looking burdocks poked up from under the snow.

"Look at all that snow!" Pantilevna said that morning. "We can take the sled and go for firewood."

She was lighting the stove, while I lay lazily in bed, watching her push the cast-iron pots far into the stove with a long-handled oven fork. When Pantilevna peered into the flames her face became as fiery-red as an engine stoker's. But though smoke poured out of the chimney, our locomotive was going nowhere: it stood as it always had, the last in the row of village houses.

The sled was up in the attic. It was an old birch sled. I carried it down, brushed it clean of straw dust, and we set off for the woods. Our store of firewood was not far away: sawn, chopped and stacked under the fir trees at the edge of the woods.



We brushed the high mounds of snow off the wood, stacked it on the sled, fastened it with a rope and were off. I pulled and Pantilevna brought up the rear, watching to see that no stick of firewood should fall off.

Not that much snow had fallen, but everything had suddenly changed, the woods and the trees. Indeed, even Pantilevna and I had changed: we were now winter people. Pantilevna wore rubber boots which looked very much like felt boots. Whisks of gray hair protruded from under her shawl. Yes, she was quite an old winter woman.

The snow covered the earth evenly, with only a mound here and there raising it slightly. These were tree stumps or hummocks. I toed one such mound and was surprised to see a mushroom. It was a summer mushroom. The cap had turned a dark-brown, and the mushroom had become very light and brittle. I broke off a bit of the cap, and it crunched. The mushroom had frozen under the snow. It was now as brittle as glass. The little worms trapped in it had also frozen. I spotted another little mound. It, too, proved to be a mushroom. This one had no worms in it. I stamped around, looking for others.

"Come on, dearie! Let's go!" Pantilevna shouted.

"There are mushrooms here!" I shouted to her. Dropping the rope, I headed back to the edge of the woods and immediately came upon a little group of small mushrooms. They had all turned black and were frozen.

"Leave those mushrooms be. They're probably no good," Pantilevna said, examining them.

"Why so? They're just frozen."

All the way back Pantilevna kept grumbling about the mushrooms being no good, saying that good mushrooms went back into the ground in winter, or hid among the leaves. So why were these sticking up like that? But when we approached the house her mood changed. She began feeling sorry for the mushrooms, saying they were so miserable, what with not having had a chance to hide in the ground and so became covered with snow and froze to death.

Once indoors, I spread the mushrooms on the windowsill to thaw. It was cool on the sill, and they thawed gradually. In doing so they seemed to be coming to life: squeaking and shuddering.

"Let's make mushroom soup," I said.

"Oh, no, dearie! Let's throw them out."

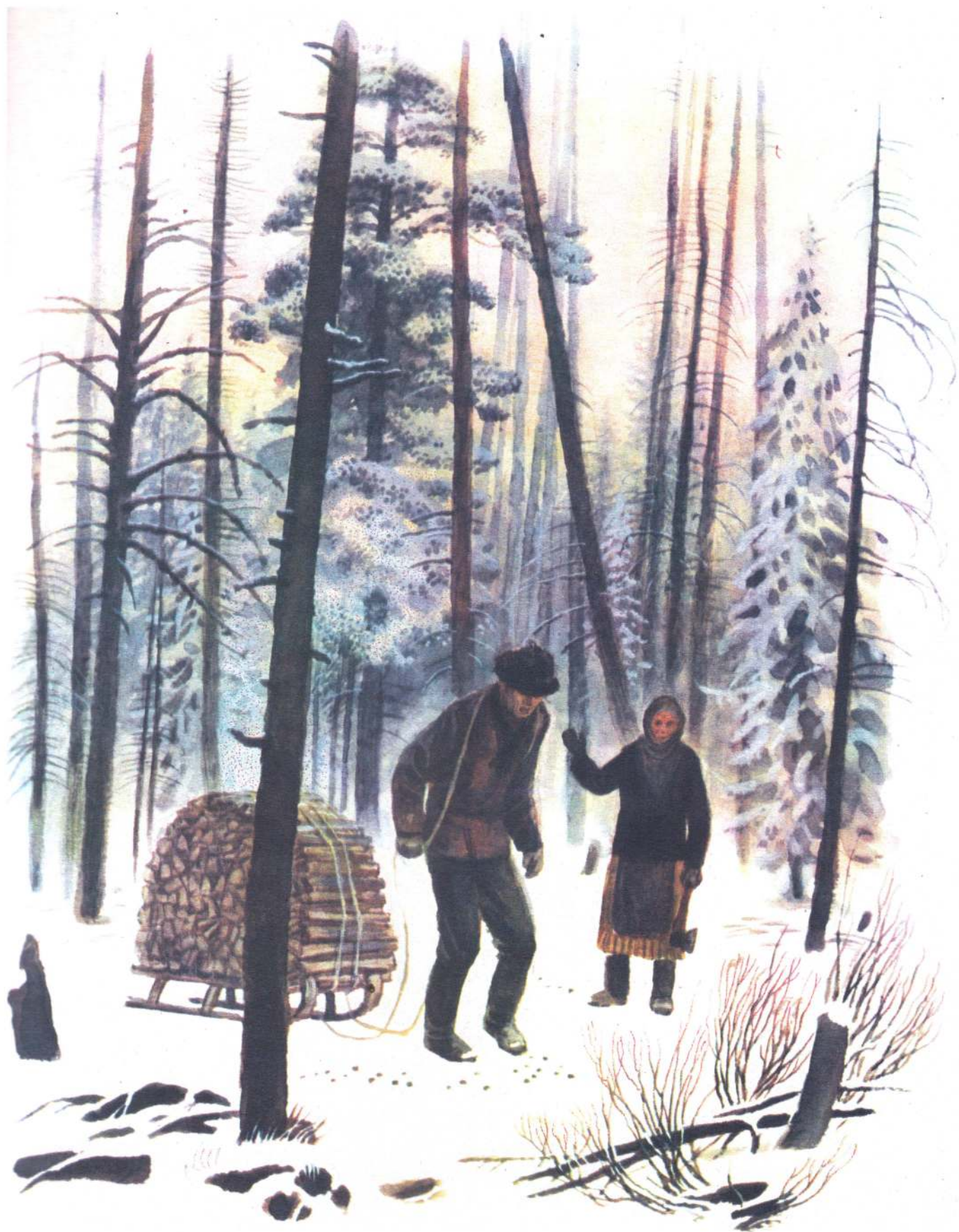
I was determined to have some soup made of winter mushrooms and finally coaxed Pantilevna into making some.

The soup was still cooking when Mironikha dropped in. She sniffed and said: "What's this I smell? Mushrooms?"

"Yes, indeed. We got them from under the snow."

"Humph! Hm...hm... I wouldn't eat that kind of trash."

No one had offered her any to begin with.



At last, the soup was ready, and Pantilevna ladled it into our bowls. She seemed hesitant to try hers at first, but then began eating with relish. I liked the soup very much. True, it was not as good as soup made from fresh summer mushrooms, but it was very tasty all the same.

“I’d never eat such trash,” Mironikha mumbled and then suddenly snatched a spoon from the table and plunged it into her bowl. “Hm... hm...” she mumbled, devouring the soup. “It’s disgraceful, that’s what!”

Pantilevna and I were silent. At last, Pantilevna said,

“Everyone else gathers summer mushrooms, but we cook snowdrops.”





THE LAST LEAF

All summer long my paintbox had been lying in the cupboard and had become covered with cobwebs, but with the advent of autumn, when the rowanberries glowed red along the edge of the woods and the maple leaves turned to copper, I got out my paintbox, slung the strap over my shoulder and hurried off.

At the edge of the woods I stopped and looked around.
The clusters of rowanberries seemed to be giving off heat. Their redness hurt my eyes.

The thrushes that flitted from branch to branch seemed heavy and red.
I decided to paint them: the rowan trees and the heavy red thrushes flitting about in them.

The painting was not coming out right.
The autumn forest was ablaze.
Fiery circles floated in front of me.
Everything was so red it seemed that blood was oozing out of the earth, while on my canvas everything seemed pale and murky.

"What're you doing? Taking a picture?" someone said behind my back.
I turned around. It was Uncle Zui, coming out of the woods with a pailful of mushrooms.

"You take a picture with a camera. I'm painting, Zui."
"Well, good for you! You go right on taking your picture."
He continued on his way, and I began painting again, but my work was pale and timid.

And this when the rowan trees and thrushes were flaming!
"No, painting is not my strong point. I'll get my gun tomorrow and..."
There was a loud, harsh cry overhead.
I was thunderstruck.

A bird perched on the rowan tree.
It was crested, had a brownish breast and blue stripes on its wings.
A blue jay!
It ruffled its feathers and cawed again.
I gazed at the jay perched on the rowan tree, had a close look at the autumn woods and became depressed.

I snapped shut my paintbox, picked up a fallen maple leaf and slapped it angrily onto my wet canvas.

"All right. Tomorrow I'll go hunt hares."
The autumn was fleeting.
The wind stripped the leaves off the trees, and then it snowed.
One winter evening Uncle Zui dropped in for tea. "Indeed," he said, pointing to the painting which I had leaned against the wall, "the leaf looks real."

"It is real."
"That's neat. So it's the last leaf of autumn. And what's this?"
"These are thrushes. They're red and heavy."
"Indeed, they are. Real heavy. They've probably glutted themselves on rowanberries."



Uncle Zui had a glass of tea, poured himself another and looked at my painting again. "Yes, the autumn woods are the best."

"They are," I agreed. "What can be better?"

"Sure enough. The leaves rustle under your feet. What can be better?"

"Yes, what can be better?" I said to myself. "What can be better than the woods in autumn? Only the woods in spring..."



